

**Problems with Nature - Sculptural Installation  
and the Culture/Nature Paradox.**

by

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# ABSTRACT

This research project investigates visual metaphors for aspects of the nature/ culture paradox. Modern human beings formalise nature, natural elements and natural processes by quantifying and qualifying the environment to better define themselves. A desire to comprehend and gain control over nature is expressed through the imposition of artificial systems and mathematical descriptions. However, the forces of entropy and decay are ever present. Despite attempts to suppress these physical processes, humans are necessarily bound to a common material existence. In response, attainment of a spiritual dimension is sought through cultural expression.

The project explores how the nature/ culture paradox is manifested in the phenomenon of landscape design, especially formal gardens of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, including features such as Platonic forms, labyrinths, mazes and meanders. Particular attention is given to the work of Batty Langley. The investigation is located within an international field of artists concerned with the culture/ nature question. The enquiry considers artists who create visual representations of symbolic pathways, such as Jørgen Thordrup and Marianne Ewaldt. Land and environment art is examined with regard to concepts of order, disorder, entropy and stasis, emphasizing those artists such as Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt and Jürg Altherr, who contrast artificial constructions with natural settings. It also considers the appropriation of nature in a search for the sublime through the sculptural installations of Anja Gallaccio.

Examination of formal garden features has informed new hybrid motifs which are developed in the work for this project. The application of these designs to the sculptural and installation mediums has involved innovative usage of materials and techniques. The development of a personal symbology to present metaphors for order and chaos/ entropy and stasis, has produced new juxtapositions of man made forms and natural elements. Exploration of the viewer's engagement with space and physical ambience, including smells, has also been an important element of the work. In addition, new methods have been developed to visualise

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concepts through computer generated virtual drawings and, to present the preparation and exhibition of sculptural installations through digital photography. Finally, the project considers the spiritual dimension within human culture, employing a number of universal symbols in new ways to create works, which echo both eastern and western sensibilities, for example, metaphorical methods for attainment and links between Buddhist and alchemical symbolism.

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## Introduction

The following exegesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter one outlines the ideas informing my work. It begins by establishing a definition of the culture/ nature relationship, including a discussion of applied systems used to describe nature and the effects of natural processes on humans. It then locates the central discussion within the context of the formal garden where the focus is on formal elements and how abstract mathematical schemas have been imposed upon nature in landscape design. Relevant aspects of Eastern and contemporary gardens are then considered in relation to the central question.

Chapter two begins with a brief outline of why I have chosen to make sculptural installations. It then presents a discussion of every major piece created throughout this project. It gives an indication of earlier exhibitions and describes the development of my work during the past three years. Considering the ephemeral nature of many of my sculptural installations, it is not possible to reconstruct each piece for the final submission. Unfortunately, images and words fall somewhat short of the direct sensory experience that installations and outdoor sculpture provides. However, the written descriptions in conjunction with extensive resource, planning and documentary evidence should provide insights into the appearance and atmosphere of each piece.

Chapter three provides a context for my project and locates it in relation to an international field. As my work has developed essentially in two phases, this chapter begins with my initial investigations into artists who have used the labyrinth, maze, meander or rhizome. Subsequent discoveries led to a section on land and environment artists who work with concepts of order, disorder, entropy and stasis. Considering the diverse approaches and varied outcomes within my practice, it was also necessary to include a practical discussion on artists who have similarly used natural materials such as trees and grass. Finally, I have incorporated a brief analysis of the relevant work of Anja Gallaccio. I feel a particular affinity with her approach and admire her ability to create powerful and relevant representations of cultural incursions into nature and the natural effects on cultural artefacts.

The conclusion summarizes innovative aspects of my project with regard to the concepts, techniques and materials involved.